CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION
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By the treaty of Yandabo, 1826, five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley namely, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur which were ruled by the Ahoms and to which the term "Assam" was originally applied, were ceded by the Burmese to the East India Company. These were added to the Presidency of Fort William and for administrative purposes Assam was formed into a Division of the Government of Bengal under a Commissioner. David Scott was the first Commissioner of Revenue and Circuit for Assam and Agent to the Governor General on the North East Frontier. There were accordingly two Establishments in his office at Gauhati - one for revenue and judicial administration of the Assam districts under British occupation and another for maintenance of political relations with the native Chiefs and Hill Tribes. An Assistant to the Commissioner was stationed in Upper Assam first at Rangpur and then at Jorhat. Some time later an Assistant was also appointed in Lower Assam.

Theoretically, the Commissioner was all powerful but in practice, for all acts beyond ordinary routine and all expenses above the prescribed amount, prior approval
of the Government of Bengal was necessary. As a result there was administrative inefficiency, confusion and delay even in the execution of important and urgent development work.

As to the material condition of the people, which reflects the true character of the Government, we find that no improvement whatsoever took place in this regard though upwards of eight years had elapsed in uninterrupted peace. When this deplorable state of affairs came to the notice of the Court of Directors, they admitted that Assam was governed "extremely ill." Even after twenty-eight years of annexation, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, an Assamese of rank and respectability, observed on the administration of Assam that "little perceptible change has been effected in the condition of the people and the good government of the Province."[2]

It may be pointed out in this connection that the original Assam districts had a polity of their own from time immemorial. Therefore, there was justification for a separate Local Administration by reason of their isolated position and on ethnical and topographical grounds. These districts could not be properly supervised from Bengal due to the difficulties of distance and communication. The

2Wills Report, 1854, Appendix J, P. XXXII.
nature and conditions of the country and the peaceful and simple habits of the people deserved a Local Administration which was expected to give close and undivided attention to the needs of the people and of their growing interests. Assam which is very resourceful and important from the strategic point of view but backward, needed personal attention of the Head of the Local Government. The Head of the Administration from a far off metropolis like Calcutta and with multifarious responsibilities which he had to shoulder could not even enquire into the real state of the country and the condition of the people at large far from doing justice to their needs. The Bengal Administration was not able to solve the problems and satisfy the wants of a newly conquered and devastated territory with widespread poverty and ignorance.

Taking these factors into consideration Assam proper as indicated above might either be created into a Chief Commissionership or be placed on the same footing in connection with Bengal which Sind had long held in connection with Bombay. The creation of a Province on either form would have been more rational and possibly more beneficial to the people concerned.

But the British in India did not follow any fixed principle in organising the conquered territories. The political map of British India was shaped by the military, political and administrative exigencies or conveniences of
the moment with small regard to the natural affinities or wishes of the people. There was not much, if any, attempt to conform to linguistic or ethnic principles.3 This was most pronounced in the case of Assam where we find that the territories acquired or annexed subsequently were all and sundry placed within the administrative unit of Assam. The districts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Naga Hills and the Subdivision of North Cashar Hills became integral parts of Assam during the period from 1826-1874. The Mikir Hills which also came into British possession at an early date formed part of the Mvpong district. Thus even before the establishment of Chief Commissionership in 1874, Assam took a shape which was much wider in extent than Assam of the Ahom age.

Let us now turn our attention to the circumstances in which the Province of Assam came into being. The way the Province came to take shape was indeed typical of how the British established their rule in India. The creation of Assam into a Chief Commissionership was the result of the reorganisation of Bengal Administrative system. The disaster caused by the Orissa Famine, 1866 brought to light many serious defects of the Bengal Administrative system. Sir George Campbell in his Orissa Famine Report, 1867, suggested radical reforms in that system. Taking one

3Reid, Sir Robert, Years of change in Bengal and Assam, 1966, P.90.
therefrom, North Cote, the Secretary of State for India, initiated a discussion on certain proposals on the administration of Bengal. In the course of discussions, two distinct proposals emerged.

One was to provide Bengal a full Government with an Executive Council as in the case of Bombay and Madras. The other being reduction in the territorial extent of the Province without bringing about any organic change in the form of the Government. This question though closely debated, was, however, allowed to drift until when Campbell as Lieutenant Governor of Bengal introduced various administrative reforms which made it impossible to defer any longer the reorganisation of the Bengal administrative system. In such circumstances, Mayo, possibly under the impact of Miss raids over Cashar, preferred the alternative proposal of diminishing the territory of Bengal by creating Assam into a Chief Commissionership as originally suggested by his predecessor. And with the approval of the Secretary of State, Assam as a separate Province came into being on February 6, 1874. This approval was, however, circumscribed by the conditions that:

1) The system of administration should be simple and inexpensive, and that
2) The Secretariat would not have the full complement of departments and staff as normally a Chief Commissioner would be entitled to.
The reasons for the creation of Chief Commissionership of Assam are mainly, that the burden of the Government of this great Province of Bengal has been found too heavy even for the very able and distinguished men, who in recent years, have filled the office of the Lieutenant Governor. It would be seen that Assam's case for a separate Local Administration was never considered from the point of view of Assam.

The Chief Commissionership of Assam thus created comprised apart from Assam proper, two Bengali districts of Cachar and Goalpara and the three Hill districts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and the Naga Hills. The district of Sylhet which was a part of Bengal proper was added to the Chief Commissionership of Assam in September, 1874. The North Lushai Hills, although hitherto administered as a part of the Province of Assam, was not formally placed under any defined administration. Under a proclamation dated the 6th September, 1896, the Governor General in Council took the said territories under his immediate authority and management and placed them under the administration of the Chief Commissioner of Assam and directed that they should be included within the Province of Assam. The South Lushai Hills which had been controlled by an Assistant Political Officer under the

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4Extra Supplement to the Gazette of India, September 21, 1874, Chief Commissioner's Powers (Sylhet) Bill.
Commissioner of Chittagong were formed into a district on 1st April 1891 and placed under a Superintendent. With effect from 1st April, 1898, the south Lushai Hills which under the Proclamation dated the 6th September 1896 were included within the Lower Province of Bengal and the tract known as Rutton Puya's villages including Demaguri in the hill tracts of Chittagong were transferred to the Assam Administration, and the district of Lushai Hills for the first time took its present form.7

In 1914, the North East Frontier district was established as an administrative unit separate from the regulation district of Lakhimpur. The numerous hill tribes who had been previously controlled by the Deputy Commissioners of Darrang and Lakhimpur, were placed under Political Officers working directly under the orders of the Government of Assam. Accordingly, the North East Frontier was divided into three administrative units namely, (I) The Central and Eastern Section, (II) The Lakhimpur Frontier and (III) The Western Section.

In 1919, the Central and Eastern Section was renamed as the Sadiya Frontier Tract and the Western Section as the Balipara Frontier Tract. The Lakhimpur

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7*Chief Commissioner's Foreign Proceedings*, May 1898 Nos.31-32, P.27.
Frontier Tract, however, continued to be known as such. These tracts were treated as separate districts of Assam.

The name 'Assam' was thus given a wider meaning when it was used to designate the whole territory of Chief Commissionership of Assam comprising the six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, two districts of the Surma Valley, four hill districts and the North East Frontier Tract.

It may be pointed out in this connection that the people of Assam proper, the people of the different hills and the people of Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara were essentially distinct each from all the others. These people who were ethnically and culturally distinct and whose material conditions were at different levels had obviously little in common to bind them together into a single political entity except the alien ruling authority.

This conglomeration of diverse elements whose interests were oftener than not conflicting and though ill-at-ease, continued so long the British ruled the country. Nevertheless, these conflicts of interests had their interactions producing stress and strain which manifested itself from time to time in the public life of the Province. In an unitary India ruled by an alien power,

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these various incongruities scattered over the map of Assam did not matter so much, nor did publicity but they became serious when the British handed over power and for the successor Governments they raised many problems and difficulties.

The anomaly of the whole arrangement may first be noted in the movement for separation of the Bengal district of Sylhet which was included in the Chief Commissionership of Assam disregarding the interests and wishes of the people. It became possible because public opinion was not then much of a power and the solidarity of the Bengali speaking people and their growing sense of unity had not been so pronounced a factor in the public life of the Province. The talk of Constitutional reform intensified the demand for separation of Sylhet. Kamini Kumar Chanda raised the question of reunion of Sylhet with Bengal in the form of a resolution in the Indian Legislative Council on 6 February 1918. The resolution was lost but the movement gradually gathered momentum and strength. Supporting the cause, Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council said that the artificial relation between Assam and Sylhet failed to produce unity between the two peoples. It would also appear from the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council that

even after fifty years of her stay with Assam, a resolution was moved in 1924 recommending the retransfer of Sylhet to Bengal.\textsuperscript{10}

The Bengali speaking population of Goalpara also started a movement for separation from Assam and amalgamation with Bengal. Starting in 1912, the movement took a definite shape in 1919 when in a meeting under the auspices of the Goalpara Association it was resolved that the district of Goalpara should be placed under the same laws and administration with the district of Rangpur and Jalnaiguri.\textsuperscript{11}

Generally speaking, the Assamese public were sympathetic to the cause of the people of Sylhet. But to the aspirations of the people of Goalpara, the opinion was divided. The situation, however, completely changed in 1919 when discussions were in progress on the proposed Montagu Chelmsford Reforms. Thereafter the leaders of the Assam Valley vehemently opposed the demand for separation of any district as they feared that the disintegration of the Province would adversely affect Assam's status in the new administrative set up. As the Government of India was also indifferent to any scheme

\textsuperscript{10}The Assam Gazette, August 13, /No. 5 Part VI. Pp. 562-561.

of territorial redistribution on the eve of the Reforms, even Sylhet was not retransferred to Bengal. In 1947, when the country was partitioned, Sylhet went back to Eastern Bengal, then forming East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

The process of balkanisation continued in the course of which Assam was split up into five political units, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland are States and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram are Union Territories. Without entering into details regarding the formation of Nagaland (1962), Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (1972), it will not perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the germ of the political disintegration of Assam lay in its very creation in 1874.

The approach which was manifest in amalgamating territories with Assam on administrative expediency without any regard to ethnical and cultural affinities was once again reflected in 1905 when Assam was tagged to East Bengal to form the shortlived Lieutenant Governorship of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The fact here was that the partition of Bengal was decided upon

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12 Ibd., pp. 233-34.

political considerations and Assam was practically annexed
to East Bengal with no regard to the interests of her people.
In the creation of/Chief Commissioner’ship of Assam as well
as in the constitution of the Province of Eastern Bengal
and Assam, Assam’s case was never considered or determined
from the point of view of the people of Assam.

Turning back to the administrative arrangement, we
find that the separation of Assam from Bengal in 1874 did
not bring about any fundamental change in the conception of
its status except the fact that it came directly under the
Government of India. The signal benefits which were
contemplated to be derived out of the creation of Chief
Commissionership in Assam did not materialise for a long
time. It remained as before a subordinate administration.
That the Chief Commissionership of Assam was no better than
a glorified Divisional administration until 1905 is evident
from the very simple and inexpensive administrative system
provided for it. The Commissioner’s office was simply
converted into the Chief Commissioner’s Secretariat which
did not have the full complement of departments and staff
as normally a Chief Commissioner was entitled to.

Moreover, the powers which the Chief Commissioner
exercised were all delegated by the Governor General and
as such, were subject to the latter’s authority. The Chief
Commissionership, again, did not owe its origin to any
Statute. Therefore, although Chief Commissionership was
regarded as a Local Government, it occupied a lower status to that of the Lieutenant Governorship which owed its origin to an Act of Parliament.

In these circumstances, it was no wonder that the establishment of Chief Commissionership in Assam did not improve the position of the Province. The executive authority of the Government of India over Assam was complete in theory as well as in practice. Every new appointment, every addition to the establishment required the specific sanction of the Government of India. The Chief Commissioner had practically no financial power. The Supreme Government controlled its budget. Its helplessness in the administration of finance would be seen from the fact that it had to take the approval of the Central Government even for trifling expenditure of contingent nature which was a subject of discretion of the Provincial Administration. The Government of Assam was handicapped by the stringent economy and rigid control enforced upon it. It had little freedom of action in the management of its own affairs.

The Chief Commissioner of Assam had practically no legislative power as Assam had no legislature of her own from 1874 to 1905. He had simply the privilege to propose to the Governor General the drafts of any Regulation for the peace and Government of territories under his administration. The Governor General in Council
had full control over Assam in the exercise of its legislative powers.

The Government of Assam had also no freedom of action in the maintenance of relation with the surrounding tribes.

Generally speaking, the Chief Commissioners of Assam were all regimented in the idea of restricted role and status of the administration. They were all ardent supporters of economy often at the expense of efficiency. Reforms and changes which were essential for the development of the province and for the good of the people could not be introduced for lack of funds.

In the above context, one would find that the administrative set up of the Chief Commissionership of Assam was certainly not adequate. The inadequacy of the administrative system in relation to the task it had to perform was inherent in the restrictive conditions imposed on it at the time of its creation. Thus in effect, the Chief Commissioners of Assam at least up to 1906 could perform only a limited role in bringing about the expected benefits to the Province.

Inspite of these limitations, most of the Chief Commissioners of Assam tried their best at ameliorating the conditions of the people of the Province. The Heads of the Local Government were selected from British administrators of proved ability. They were drawn from Indian Civil Service except in the case of the first Chief
Commissioner, Colonel Keating, who belonged to the Army. Some of the Chief Commissioners of Assam possessed high academic qualification and some earned reputation as writers. At least one of them, Sir Henry Cotton whose name is associated with the history of the Indian National Movement, identified himself with the aspirations of the people of the Province. The love of the people for him, described as 'the foremost ruler of the Province', was perpetuated when the College at Gauhati was named after him.14

From the administrative point of view, Assam was, however, benefitted by her amalgamation with East Bengal in 1905. When Assam was reverted to her former status of a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1912, it retained some of the benefits of earlier expansion during the Lieutenant Governorship of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Assam emerged as an adult member in the family of Provinces of British India and henceforth its development began to receive greater attention. The Second Chief Commissionership (1912-1921) was better in many respects though economy continued to be the prime consideration. Assam got a Legislative Council in 1912.

At the end of this brief survey one cannot perhaps resist the conclusion that had Assam proper been given a separate Local Government of its own with adequate powers

14 Times of Assam, April 20, 1901.
under the direct control of the Government of India, had the Hill districts inhabited by so many tribes had their own political set up, had the districts of Surma Valley been continued with Bengal, the North Eastern Frontier of India might have made significant progress - political, economic and cultural. The centrifugal forces which came to the surface at a later period resulting in the dismemberment of the state of Assam could have been avoided. Instead, the unhindered development of both the Assam Valley and the Hills governed in their own way, might have given rise, under economic compulsions, to a centripetal force that could bind the whole of the North Eastern India into a single political unit with a regional personality of her own with immense resources - mineral, agricultural, tea and forest.